



Where's the Love?

By Maj. Owen Coulman, USMC

We had another great day for flying in the beautiful American Southwest. I was part of a flight of four AH-1Ws flying a cross-country from Sedona, Ariz., to NAS North Island, Calif., where we would spend the night.

Because we'd be flying outside our normal operating area, we thoroughly studied the map of our route on the Phoenix Sectional Aeronautical Chart. We identified any obstacles and made sure we were in compliance with FAA rules. We noted three items: Love Field's Class D airspace, the occasional wilderness areas, and a couple of hang glider and glider areas northeast of Prescott's Love Field. We also saw a note about extensive IFR training in the vicinity of the Drake VOR (northwest of Love Field), 10,000 feet and below, so we planned an appropriate VFR cruising altitude.

Satisfied we were ready to fly, we departed Sedona, climbed to 8,500 feet MSL, squawked 1200, and began our route as a flight of four, flying in a fingertip formation. As we headed westbound, we assumed our even-plus-500-foot altitude would help mitigate the risk of any civilian traffic in the area. But, we quickly were proved wrong when, out of nowhere, a Cessna 172, heading eastbound, split the formation and missed our lead aircraft by only 50 feet. We identified the aircraft as belonging to a local civilian flying school and called them the following day to report how close they had come to swapping paint with our lead aircraft.

How could this near-midair have been prevented? We thought we were doing everything right: We were flying in an easily recognizable formation, squawking 1200, and transiting at a correct altitude. After consideration, I decided to check some of my civilian publications, specifically the "Flight Guide Airport and Frequency Manual," Volume 1, where I noticed a few items of interest.

First, the note about extensive IFR training in the vicinity of the Drake VOR was because Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University conducted extensive flight training in the area. I knew Embry-Riddle had a campus in Prescott, but I didn't consider the risks of transiting through their potentially high-sortie-rate operating area during our preflight planning.

Second, when I looked at the Love Field Class D area, I noticed two VFR reporting points to the east of Love Field that were not on our Phoenix Sectional Aeronautical Chart. A check of the civilian pubs while planning at the civilian FBO at Sedona could have made us change our planned flight route or be more aware of the potential for civilian traffic in the area.

We learned at flight school to review all available information during preflight planning. When transiting outside of a local operating area, it's a good idea to read all publications, including civilian flight publications. The civilian piloting that Cessna 172 probably was as surprised to see us as we were to see him. 🦅

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